

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMPREHENSION HYPOTHESIS: A REVIEW ON THE CURRENT RESEARCH ON INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

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### ABSTRACT

The Comprehension Hypothesis (CH) is the most powerful hypothesis in the field of Second Language Acquisition despite the presence of the rivals the skill-building hypothesis, the output hypothesis, and the interaction hypothesis. The competing hypotheses state that consciously learned linguistic knowledge is a necessary step for the development of second language competence whereas the CH posits that comprehensible input as the crucial ingredient of SLA. Moreover, conscious knowledge of second language can be used only to edit the output of the acquired language. The article further reviews some of the current research on vocabulary acquisition and the review confirms that incidental acquisition of vocabulary is more powerful than intentional learning.

**Keywords:** Comprehensible Input, Incidental Learning, Comprehension Check.

### INTRODUCTION

The Comprehension Hypothesis is not only a popular but also a commonly criticized theory on the ground that comprehensible input alone is not enough for language acquisition. The hypothesis states that we acquire language when we understand messages or language acquisition happens when we receive comprehensible input while reading and listening. If the input is well within the competence of a learner, then he/she will acquire all measures of language competence including grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and spelling subconsciously. In other words, if the current level of a learner is (i), then the input should be (i+1). More precisely, the input should contain some aspects of language which the learner has not acquired but is developmentally ready to acquire. The level (i) of the input, that is, previously acquired language competence will help the learner to move to the next level (i+1).

Other competing hypotheses such as the skill-building hypothesis and the output hypothesis have claimed that conscious knowledge of language is necessary for the development of language competence. The skill-building hypothesis claims that skills are first learnt consciously and they are routinized using drills and exercises on vocabulary,

syntax and grammar rules. This, of course, is the delayed gratification approach to language learning (Krashen, 2004). The output hypothesis claims that output production using conscious knowledge plays 'a star role' (Swain, 2005) in developing language competence. Moreover, the three functions of the Swain's hypothesis are related to conscious learning and, not to acquisition (Ponniah & Krashen, 2008).

The interaction hypothesis posits that comprehensible input alone is not enough for acquisition. Input must be supplemented by activities such as negotiation for meaning, modification of structures through clarification request and comprehension check while interacting with the conversational partner. Here, the learners are 'pushed' to produce output by negotiating conversation to enhance comprehensibility. Negotiating conversations "won't help us to acquire the language but will lead to frustration and discouragement... the only way to increase competence in speaking is through comprehensible input, by understanding what we hear and read" (Krashen 2008, p.19).

The monitor hypothesis, which is correct with the CH, clearly states that consciously learned knowledge can be used only to edit the output of the acquired language gained by receiving comprehensible input (Krashen 2003). This

reveals that conscious knowledge of a language has a specific (monitoring) role and it will not affect acquisition.

Some researchers have criticized that the Comprehension Hypothesis does not give an account of how input turns into acquisition or the process of acquisition (e.g. McLaughlin 1987). This, of course, is the misinterpretation of the theory and its practical applications. Ellidokuzoglu (2008, p. 7) dismisses such criticisms as groundless:

*"When an L2 learner and ample amount of comprehensible input come together, acquisition takes place, proportional to the comprehensibility and pleasurable of input and inversely proportional to the stress in the environment. How? Well, we don't know the details of how, just like we don't know the details of how gravitation takes place. No one has blamed Newton for not putting forward a theory; his theory has proved to be valid across a wide variety of circumstances. Similarly Krashen's theory emphasizing the importance of CI in SLA has also been supported by many studies showing the effectiveness of input-based methodologies".*

### Selected Review on Incidental vocabulary Acquisition

We involuntarily absorb meaning of words when we understand messages and not when focusing on words. - Incidental learning.

Two different methods of learning have dominated the recent discussion on vocabulary acquisition: incidental learning (learning vocabulary subconsciously) and intentional learning (learning words consciously using tools such as a dictionary). A wealth of research have supported the claim that vocabulary can be acquired subconsciously while receiving comprehensible input (e.g. Krashen 2004 Lee, 2009 Kweon and Kim, 2008; Day et al. 1991). Wagovich and Newhoff (2004) claim that school age children in the course of natural reading will glean some partial word knowledge from a single exposure. Carey(1978) asserts that one or a few exposure to a word will help the child to acquire some of the syntactic and semantic aspects of the word (fast mapping) and, when the child encounters the same word repeatedly in different contexts will lead to the acquisition of the complete meaning of the word (full mapping).

Tekmen and Daloglu (2006) reported that the intermediate,

upper intermediate and advanced level students who read the text 'The Golden Fleece' had greater gains in vocabulary. Moreover, the data confirms that their current level of understanding the language has helped them move to the next level ( $i+1$ ). Students were given 50 minutes to read the text. While reading the text for the first time, they listened to a recording of the text. The students used the remaining hour to reread the text silently and they were not allowed to use tools such as a dictionary. Thirty identified target words were given on the pre-test and the post-test and the delayed post-test. The delayed post test was conducted one week after the study. Analysis of the data revealed that there was significant lexical gains on the raw scores for the subjects after the post test. The results of the delayed posttest showed that the subjects were able to retain the incidentally acquired words without much attrition. Subjects' lexical gain is consistent with the comprehensibility of the text. Previously acquired language competence has helped them move to next level,  $i+1$ . The vocabulary knowledge (level  $i$ ) of the subjects is measured using a pre reading test (mean scores for intermediate 14.97; for upper intermediate 15.84; for advanced 19.03). The gains (+1) for the subjects (for intermediate 3.12; for upper intermediate 4.00; for advanced 5.34) on the post test are proportionate to the comprehensibility of the text and the current vocabulary knowledge ( $i$ ).

Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) reported that 20 Spanish EFL students who read the novel 'Things Fall Apart' had considerable gains on vocabulary of an African language Ibo. The study confirms that incidental acquisition of vocabulary happens from reading a single novel. The subjects acquired an average of 9.39 (28%) words out of the 34 target words, with more gains on the words that occurred more than five times in the novel. The researchers conclude that learners can involuntarily acquire vocabulary by reading a single authentic novel, but the words acquired by the subjects is not as high as the results produced by the intentional learning tasks. Therefore, the researchers suggest that the combination of both incidental and intentional approaches, using explicit post reading tasks will enhance vocabulary development. But studies (e.g. Mason and Krashen, 2004; Lehmann 2007)

examining this claim confirm that explicit learning of words after reading session has only limited value. Sánchez and Schmitt have calculated the mean scores of words taking into account all aspects of meaning including spelling recognition, word class recall, meaning recall, meaning recognition, all word knowledge aspects. It is difficult to acquire all aspects of meaning in a single exposure. On the first reading, learners acquire partial meaning of words and the complete meaning of words is acquired when they get exposure to such words repeatedly in different contexts (Carey 1978).

In fact, there are several limitations in learning a word consciously, using intentional learning approach. A word contains more lexical and semantic information in it and it is difficult to learn all aspects of meaning explicitly. Moreover, consciously learned knowledge will fade away over a period of time. Re analysis of the data (Mason and Krashen 2010) of File and Adam confirms that subjects could retain the incidentally acquired words and the focus-on-form words (intentional learning) were rapidly forgotten in 16 days, after the treatment period (Table 1).

Participants of both integrated and isolated groups have spent considerable time in learning the target words, in addition to reading. Thus, it is very clear that incidental learning is more effective in terms of vocabulary acquisition per unit of time (see Mason & Krashen 2004). In addition to the acquisition of vocabulary, reading results in the development of grammatical competence, writing ability and reading fluency (Ponniah 2008, 2009; Krashen 2004). The data collected to support the form focused learning of vocabulary has, in fact, confirmed that incidental learning of vocabulary is more effective.

It will be too difficult to use the consciously learned words in actual performance. Adult ESL students (Ponniah, 2011) who read a short story acquired vocabulary incidentally

and they were able to use the subconsciously acquired words in sentences and the students who learned meaning of the words in isolation could not use. The experimental subjects of the study read the edited version of the short story 'The Chinese Statue' and the comparisons learned the dictionary meaning of 51 unfamiliar words and the 16 most difficult words contained in the short story. The unfamiliar and the difficult words were identified through a pilot study. The subjects were asked to take two pretests. The first test asked the participants to write the meaning of 20 words and the second test asked them to use the words in twenty different sentences. The same tests were given as the post tests. The results of the tests confirmed that the subjects who read the short story were able to use the subconsciously acquired words in sentences and the comparison subjects could not use the consciously learned words. The gain for the comparison subjects is 0.57 (2.82%); for the experimental 6.73(33.65%). The differences were statistically significant ( $t = 4.48$ ,  $df = 50$ ,  $p < .000$ ), and for comparisons the t test failed to bring reliable difference in the mean scores (Pre test  $M= 9.52$ ,  $sd=3.70$  and the Post test  $M=10.09$ ,  $sd= 3.57$ ),  $t = .52$ ,  $df = 44$ ,  $p = .601$ . The study confirmed that there are severe limits in using consciously learned words in real situation.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that vocabulary acquisition happens when learners receive comprehensible input in the form of reading and listening. Incidental learning results in the acquisition of all aspects of word meaning, including the grammar of words. The explicit learning of words will fade away from the mind over a period of time and, in fact, it is difficult to use the consciously learned words in sentences.

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Groups	Pre	Post	Delayed
Incidental (Reading)	19.6	21.9	23
Integrated (Reading + Learning of target words while reading )	18.3	33.6	24.6
Isolated (Reading + Learning of target words before reading)	18	37.1	25.1

(From Mason and Krashen 2010)

Table 1. Pretest, Posttest and Delayed Test scores for the subjects of File and Adam

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